

# POLYPHONY IN THE VOCAL TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF THE PEOPLES OF FINNO-UGRIAN LANGUAGES

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**Abstract:** The archaic vocal traditional music of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages is always monophonic. This originates partly from its function, partly from its interpretation. It was originally of ritual function: music was not used for amusement but – at least in the case of peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages – it was the means of maintaining connection with gods and goddesses, as they could not understand everyday human speech. Resulting from this function, every song was improvised, as it can be found among the Khantys even in our days. The songs performed on the occasion of bear feasts or shaman ceremonies, as well as the individual songs have fixed contents, but the lyrics and melody of the songs are re-composed every time according to traditional rules, in a similar way as tradition-keepers tell folk tales. In case of shaman ceremonies, contents also change in accordance with the aim of the ceremony, e.g. what is asked from the god, but the way of asking remains traditional. Naturally improvised songs may be sung only in solo.

Polyphony can be materialized only if singing in groups comes into existence. The first step is the alternation of the solo and the group: already

here one can find to some extent fixation primarily in the melody. However, the lines of the lyrics are improvised by the solo, and the group repeats them with the fixed melodic line. This is clear, e.g. in the case of the lyrics of *Kalevala*, but there the second line of the two-line melody unit is not fixed, so it is imaginable that during the group singing of the second melodic line some cacophony can be heard, as the members of the group may sing more variants of it. In the case of an Estonian song, both melody and lyrics are already fixed, but the order of the verses is decided by the soloist, who begins to sing alone, and the group joins at the end of the first line. Then they sing the second melodic line with the lyrics heard from the soloist.

The possibility of collective singing comes into being with the changing of function (singing becomes a means of amusement) and with fixation of melody and lyrics. Fixed melodies and lyrics are found in the archaic music of most peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages, but these are always monophonic, even if they are sung in groups. However, traditional songs (like the pieces of other fields of folklore) live in variants, and it may occur at any time that – during collective singing – the members of the group sing different variants at the same time. As a result of this, in certain places of the melody more pitches may be sung at the same time. The question is, whether we have to consider this to be polyphony or rather the joint appearance of more forms of monophony.

We can find this phenomenon in Komi traditional music as well, even in much more conspicuous form than in Hungarian traditional songs. We may study in them as well, whether there is polyphony in the song or the members of the group sing two (perhaps more) variants at the same time. In certain cases both voices may be counted to be tantamount to each other, being more or less different, in other cases we can observe a main voice and another being, e.g. a third above or under.

Where we can find polyphony in the traditional music of peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages, we always have to study whether there are two variants sung at the same time, or it is real polyphony which always comes into existence as the result of foreign, e.g. Slavic influence. Such songs prove that there are more kinds of polyphony.

IN THE RESEARCH OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC, we have to make a distinction between vocal and instrumental music, at least in the case of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages. Instrumental music, having other laws than vocal music is to be found among all peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages, their archaic music is, however, predominantly vocal, without instrumental accompaniment.

Archaic vocal traditional music of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages is basically monophonic. This originates in its function and in the manner of singing resulting from it.

The function of singing was originally ritual: music was used not for amusement but – at least in the case of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages – for making connection with gods and goddesses, as they do not understand everyday human speech. The manner of singing resulting from this is quite unusual to European ears. As its function is not delighting, the singer does not aspire to euphony, to clear singing. Certain pitches are also of instable height:<sup>1</sup> this means that you can sing more pitches at certain points of the song (e.g. third, fourth or sixth degree). Besides the pitches there are other differences as well: e.g. the singer takes a breath during a word, not at the end of the line, where there is a pause. Resulting from this, rhythm is not smooth but it jolts here and there. Because of all these the songs are not suitable for being sung by more people, therefore they cannot be polyphonic.

Resulting from their function, all songs were improvised, as they are even today in certain groups of the Khanties (Ostyaks). The contents of the songs performed during the *bear feasts* are fixed: it is always demanded to sing the appropriate story. The stories of certain gods follow one another in a certain order: as the bear feast lasts for more days, it is also determined which story has to be sung on which day. In the case of *shaman ceremony* the contents of the songs are changing with the aim of the ceremony: they are performed just for the problems, the questions put to the gods change, therefore the songs containing these problems and questions must be improvised. The contents of the *individual songs* also change, but in another way than those of the songs of the shaman ceremonies: the events of life re-

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<sup>1</sup> Lázár 1988: 293–295.

main the same, at the very most the singer puts other (newer) elements to them or sings about different ones on different occasions. Many individual songs begin with the singer introducing himself or herself: I is me who is singing, I am this and that, I live along this and that river, my village is like this and that etc. Despite of this, the lyrics and the melody of the song is improvised on the occasion of every performance.

Songs are improvised in the same way as folk tales if told by traditional performers. Contents remain always the same, possibly certain elements may be left out, if the time is not enough for long and detailed performance. In songs as well as in folk tales, there are stable phrases used compulsorily. In folk tales, these are found e.g. at the beginning of the tale: "Once upon a time", and at the end of them: "They lived happy ever after." About the expressions in Khanty traditional songs there is a study of Éva Schmidt,<sup>2</sup> where she writes about the names of settlements in songs, which are always different of those used in speech: the village named Vanzevát e.g. occurs in the songs as "the land being full of spirits of diseases." In the introductory part of the study the author mentions that the ritual language of the songs was different of everyday language, and it was called "idol language." Other parts of the lyrics of the songs are changing in the same way as folk tales when we tell them with our own words. In consequence of the differences of the lyrics of songs and everyday speech, Khanty songs are not understandable for those not knowing the phrases of the ritual language of the songs. We met this phenomenon when with two colleagues we made fieldwork among the Khanties. The son of a singer speaking well his mother tongue said that he was not able to understand the lyrics of the song performed by his father: though the words are all understandable, the whole has no meaning.

Till now the discussion went about the causes of the fact that the vocal traditional music of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages is monophonic. They are improvised, consequently sung alone, so polyphony is impossible. However, in the music of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages it also happens that monophony is not unambiguous: in what follows, the steps leading to polyphony are being discussed.

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2 Schmidt 1983.

For polyphonic singing first of all, it is necessary to have songs with a fixed melody and lyrics: except for the Ob-Ugrians (Khanties and Mansis) we can find songs like this among the traditional ones of all peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages. Another necessary element is to have more people singing at the same time. An archaic form of this is the alternating change of choir leader and the group: melody is already fixed, lyrics is begun by the choir leader, then the group joins to the end, and often repeats it. Lyrics in this case do not have to be fixed: to repeat a line of lyrics cannot mean any problem for anyone. Later, lyrics became fixed as well, only the order of them was dictated by the choir leader: this happens, e.g. in an Estonian song, in which the group joins at the end of the first line (-kene), and repeats the line of the lyrics with the melody of the second line of the song. (Figure 1, Music 1)



Figure 1.

The ritual function of singing was later completed by the function of amusement, and improvisation came to an end as melody and lyrics were fixed. This gave occasion to establish group singing. We can find it in the traditional vocal folk music of most peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages, and where it is found, it is always monophonic. It happens in Hungarian traditional songs as well, especially during the round dance of women, that there is a choir leader beginning the song, and the others join. In such a case the choir leader gives only the beginning of the fixed lyrics, the others join

and sing the whole strophe of four lines without repeating anything: it is only the order of the strophes which is yet not fixed. The next step towards the development of polyphony is the fixation of the order of the strophes to make possible for the group to sing everything together. We must not forget that traditional songs (as all other products of folklore) are living in variants, and it may happen at any time that during singing together the members of the group know and sing different variants at the same time. As a result of this, at different points of the melody, there are more pitches sung. The question is whether we should reckon this to be polyphony or more monophonic songs sung at the same time. I could hear like this many times, when, e.g. two folk choirs could sing simultaneously during a round dance or at the table, but I was not able to find any recording about this. It is understandable that researchers making recordings about monophonic Hungarian folk songs reckoned this seeming polyphony as an error, therefore they did not record it but asked those knowing one variant to sing that, and then those knowing the other variant to sing that. (Figure 2, Music 2)

Ősz - szel érik, babám, a fe - ke - te sző - lő,

Te vol - tál az i - ga - zi sze - re - tő,

Bo - csáss meg, ha va - la - va - la - ha vé - tet - tem,

El - lenedre, babám, rossz - zat csele - ked - tem.

*Minek varrod, babám, azt a slingolt kendőt,  
Néked varrom, hogy legyél szeretőm,  
Négy sarkára négy szál szagos rozsmaringot,  
Közepébe, babám, hogy szeretőd vagyok.*

Figure 2.



mo-dar-bok-sis pyž boš-ti da, tok-ma kar uw - ti kyw-ti,  
tok-ma kar uw - ti kyw-ti da, uš-t'ug-ba-zar stu-pi - ti,  
uš-t'ug-ba-zar stu-pi - ti da, me i ba-za - re ka - ji,  
me i ba-za - re ka - ji da, me i ka-ba - ke py - ri,  
me i ka-ba - ke py - ri da, i - van ři-ma ču-ma-kis,  
i - van ři-ma ču-ma-kis da an-na ři-ma ba-ba-is,  
an-na ři-ma ba-ba-is da do-na vi - na vu - za - le,  
do-na vi - na vu - za - le da, rum-ka ju - wi, kyk ju - wi,  
rum - ka ju - wi, kyk ju - wi da, ju - rin ku - tis šu - mit - ni,  
ju - rin ku - tis šu - mit - ni da, či - ži - kes ko - le korš - ni,  
či - ži - kes ko - le korš - ni da, či - žik si - ja pyš - je - ma,  
či - žik si - ja pyš - je - ma da, y - džid jo - re pyš - je - ma,  
y - džid jo - re pyš - je - ma da, i - čet jo - re puk - še - ma,  
i - čet jo - re puk - še - ma da, goš - t'it - ni - se ko - ris - ni,  
goš - t'it - ni - se ko - ris - ni da, goš - t'it - ni - se paš - a - bu...

Figure 3.



Figure 4.

We can find this sham-polyphony among the Komis (Syrjens) as well, but in a much more striking way than in Hungarian traditional songs. We have to examine whether they sing two variants at the same time, or a song in two parts. In certain cases both “parts” may be reckoned to be variants corresponding in value, sung at the same time. It is important that in these cases “polyphony” concerns only some points of the melody, it does not occur through the whole melody: if there is a point of the melody where one singer steps down and the other up, or one steps a second and the other a fourth down or up, perhaps we may reckon these to be two variants sung at the same time. (Figure 3, Music 3)



In other Komi songs – see e. g. the previous example – we can find real polyphony: there is a main part and another part a third lower or higher. In this case both parts occur through the whole melody, though there may occur some points where they sing the same pitch. (Figure 4)

As the archaic traditional songs of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages are fundamentally monophonic, polyphony in them has to be reckoned as foreign influence. In Hungarian and Finnish traditional vocal music, polyphony does not occur. Among the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages living in Russia, both monophony and polyphony occur: the latter is probably due to Slavic influence.

When we find polyphony in the songs of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages, we have to examine whether it is real polyphony or two monophonic variants sung together. Songs like this show that there are more kinds of polyphony: in this study we have seen a possible way of not real polyphony coming to existence. Hopefully, it could call the attention to such phenomena in traditional vocal music of the peoples of Finno-Ugrian languages which may be important.

## Bibliography

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